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SUBJECT: BELGIUM: EUR ENGAGEMENT ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

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BRUSSELS 00000011 001.4 OF 002

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Embassy Brussels' Public Diplomacy (PD) office has been working with the Washington, D.C.-based Non Governmental Organization "Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights" (<http://www.karamah.org/>) since 2004 in order to empower Belgian Muslim women and improve their health and well-being. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) In 2004, post invited Dr. Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, Professor of Law, University of Richmond, and Founder/Director of "Karamah," to Belgium for the first time. The main purpose was for Professor Al-Hibri to participate in a one-day conference on the status of Muslim women and to meet with various Belgians (Muslims and non-Muslims working on minority integration and minority women's issues) to learn from the U.S. experience in dealing with these issues. By doing so, post hoped to strengthen ties with moderate Muslims and Muslim organizations in Belgium as well as continue to create a climate of trust and understanding of U.S. society and values within the Belgian Muslim community at large, away from international political crises. The overall purpose was to present a positive image of the U.S. as a pluralistic society with respect for all religions and all minorities.

¶3. (U) While it was extremely difficult at the time, (shortly after the Iraq war), for the Embassy and any U.S. speaker to be accepted as a credible interlocutor within Belgium's Muslim communities (the organizers suffered severe criticism within their community for associating with U.S. government personnel), the conference was a resounding success. While most of the conference speakers addressed Muslim women's issues in terms of the clash of civilizations - "modernizing" Islam or "islamizing" modernity (a theme that did not seem to resonate with the audience, more than half of which consisted of Muslim women) - Dr. Al-Hibri struck a chord with the audience by arguing in a scholarly fashion that the tenets of Islam itself prescribe a de facto affirmative action for women. She asserted that in most Islamic cultures around the world, cultural practices that suppress women are represented as principles of faith. What is needed, she said, are more (female) Islamic scholars able to refute these modern perversions of Islam in Europe and everywhere they are found. The areas of family law, religion and civil statutes frequently conflict, but the answer is not to ignore one or other set of rules, but to reconcile the two (that is, civil law and Islamic law). In the U.S. this is commonly done by means of advice to the court by Islamic scholars. The possibility of establishing a system of Islamic jurisprudence in the West based on the traditional Qu'ran was a real revelation to the audiences here. There are no real Islamic experts in Belgium and all efforts to reconcile what are perceived to be the tenets of

Islam and the requirements of civil law have been directed at forcing individuals to choose between them.

¶4. (U) The conference organizers reported afterwards that Dr. Al-Hibri had made a very positive impression, especially on young Muslim girls. Even the more conservative Muslims, mainly those representing mosques, began to realize that they have more to gain than to lose by not letting international politics get in the way of their own emancipation process. The sentiment that came out of the conference was that working together with American Muslims (even with the help of the U.S. Embassy) may be OK after all, adding that they were especially hopeful for the next generation of young Muslim women.

¶5. (U) Building on this success, PD Brussels invited Dr. Al-Hibri back for more meetings and lectures, including a speech before the Belgian parliament in March 2005 and a hearing before the European parliament in April 2008. In 2005, post invited a young Belgian Muslim woman to participate in Karamah's annual "Law and Leadership Summer Program (LLSP)," an intensive three-week seminar on Islamic Jurisprudence, Comparative Law, Conflict Resolution, and Leadership Development, held in Washington, D.C.

¶6. (U) The feedback on the LLSP was so positive that in 2006 post selected (and financed) five Muslim women coming from all parts of Belgium, and another six every year since then. Today, post has a pool of 25 Belgian Karamah LLSP alumni, several of whom are now part of a steering committee that was created in October 2009, to establish a "Karamah EU" in Brussels which will be focusing on specific issues facing Belgian (and ultimately European) women and their communities.

EASON

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